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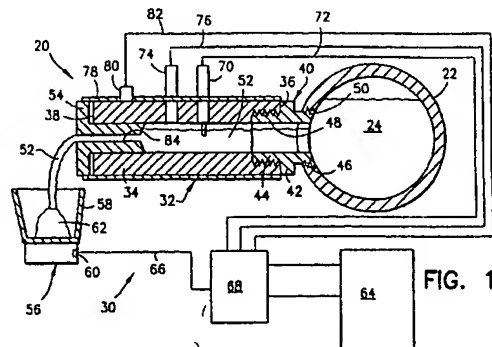
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(54) On-line rheometer device

(57) A system for providing process control information, such as viscosity, concerning a polymer melt comprises a means (22) containing a polymer melt under pressure; means (34) for diverting a stream of the polymer melt directly from said containing means to and through an orifice (54) of predetermined geometrical shape wherein the flow of said diverted portion to and through said orifice is unobstructed and directly dependent on the pressure of said main polymer melt wherein the cross sectional area is sized to permit the flow of said diverted melt polymer therethrough without additional independent means acting on said diverted melt polymer for increasing flow through said orifice. The system also includes temperature sensing means (70) for measuring the temperature of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant temperature signal; pressure sensing means (74) for measuring the pressure of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant pressure signal, said pressure signal being directly dependent on the pressure of polymer in said main polymer melt and the predetermined size of said orifice; and means weighing (56) at least a portion of said diverted melt stream discharged through said orifice, said weighing means including weight sensing means (60) for measuring the weight of diverted melt stream and producing a resultant weight signal. Computer means (64) is responsive to the temperature, pressure and weight signals for determining process characteristics of the main

polymer melt.



EP 0 899 556 A2

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Description

[0001] The present invention relates generally to the measurement of process characteristics of melted materials and pertains, more specifically, to the on-line measurement of such characteristics as the viscosity of polymer melts for purposes of monitoring and controlling of manufacturing processes involving molten plastics.

[0002] Rheological testing equipment has been available for a very long time in conducting laboratory measurements of certain important characteristics of polymer melts used in various manufacturing processes. Thus, such properties as viscosity and melt flow index are being measured in the laboratory with increasing accuracy. More recently, efforts have been directed toward the measurement of these characteristics on-line, during the manufacturing process itself, in order to provide constant, closer control over the quality of the melt utilized in the process. On-line measurement requires equipment which not only is relatively easy to use and maintain, but which is rugged enough to withstand the operating conditions to which the equipment will be exposed. In order to be effective, the equipment must be responsive, and must avoid disturbing the manufacturing process being monitored.

[0003] Among the more successful on-line rheometers available currently are capillary rheometers which divert a portion of the polymer melt from the main stream of molten plastic, conduct measurements on the diverted melt, and then simply purge the melt out to the atmosphere, hence called an on-line rheometer. Also, rheometers have been developed in which the diverted melt is returned to the main stream, hence called an in-line rheometer, thereby eliminating additional steps associated with the purge stream. Both on-line and in-line rheometers usually employ a first metering pump, such as a gear pump, to feed a capillary passage with a controlled flow of the diverted melt, and in case of in-line, a second metering pump to return the diverted melt to the main stream. Pressure drop along the capillary passage is measured and the temperature of the diverted melt is closely controlled with an independent heating or cooling arrangement in order to measure viscosity, as a function of the measure of the pressure drop, to gain the information necessary to control the process.

[0004] For a more complete understanding of the state of the technology with respect to rheological testing, consider some instances of known methods and apparatus as reflected by the patent literature. U.S. Patent No. 4,817,416 to Blanch et al. discloses a system for making in-line rheological measurements utilizing a rheometer of the type in which a first metering pump delivers diverted melt from a process main stream to a capillary passage and a second metering pump returns the diverted melt from the capillary passage to the process main stream and the viscosity of the diverted melt is measured by controlling the rate of flow of the melt to maintain constant the pressure drop between spaced

apart locations along the capillary passage and measuring the temperature of the melt in the capillary passage. The measurements may be made while controlling the speed of the second metering pump independent of the speed of the first metering pump to maintain the pressure at the exit of the capillary passage essentially constant. The capillary passage is placed in close proximity to the process main stream for maintaining a relatively short residence time during which the diverted melt resides outside the process main stream so as to attain a relatively quick response to changes in the measured viscosity.

[0005] U.S. Patent No. 4,449,395 to Kurtz et al. discloses a system for testing thermoplastic material according to which a fractional, continuous, molten and flowable sample of the material is passed as a stream to and successively through each of either a controllable pumping zone maintained at constant temperature and pressure or controllable pressure zone maintained at constant flow rate and temperature, and a die zone to form a continuous strand of the material. The viscosity of the material in the pumping and die zones is measured. A measurement of elasticity is provided by obtaining a measurement of percentage of cross-section area swell in the strand in passage from the die zone over a constant length distance downstream of a point of mark sensing. The viscosity measurement is combined with the elasticity measurement to provide fuller rheological characterization data for the material.

[0006] U.S. Patent No. 4,403,502 to Lindt discloses a motionless viscometer and associated method for resinous materials including polymeric foams and non-resinous materials includes a reservoir section, a receiver section and an interposed tube. As the foam is expanded, the axial pressure within the connecting tube is measured as is the rate of rise of the foam within the receiver element. Shear viscosity and density as functions of time may be determined.

[0007] In accordance with the present invention, there is provided a system for providing process control information concerning a polymer melt comprising: means containing a polymer melt under pressure; means for diverting a stream of said polymer melt directly from said containing means to and through an orifice of predetermined cross sectional area wherein the flow of said diverted portion to and through said orifice is unobstructed and directly dependent on the pressure of said main polymer melt, said cross sectional area being sized to permit the flow of said diverted melt polymer therethrough without additional independent means acting on said diverted melt polymer for increasing flow through said orifice; temperature sensing means for measuring the temperature of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant temperature signal; pressure sensing means for measuring the pressure of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant pressure signal, said pressure signal being directly dependent on the pressure of polymer in said main polymer melt and the predetermined

size of said orifice; means weighing at least a portion of said diverted melt stream discharged through said orifice, said weighing means including weight sensing means for measuring the weight of diverted melt stream and producing a resultant weight signal; and computer means responsive to the temperature, pressure and weight signals for determining process characteristics of the main polymer melt.

[0008] In the present invention, the flow of the diverted stream is unobstructed and characterized by the absence of pumps or other pressure enhancing devices which might be employed to increase the pressure in the diverted stream. The orifice is sized to provide for substantially continuous flow of polymer melt there-through with the pressure differential provided by the pressure in the main polymer melt and the pressure at the orifice outlet which is typically atmospheric pressure. Preferably the orifice opening has a diameter of about 0.05 to about 0.15 inch or if the opening is non-circular an equivalent cross-sectional area. The means containing the polymer melt is preferably an extruder. A single screw or twin screw extruder having a Length to Diameter ratio from about 5 to about 60, and preferably from about 20 to about 40, a pressure in the extruder of polymer melt greater than about 20 pounds per square inch and typically within the range of about 600 to about 2000 pounds per square inch, more typically within the 800 to 1400 range, and an extruder diameter of about $\frac{3}{4}$ to 6, preferably about 1 to about 8 inches, are preferred features.

[0009] With the above system, a passage extends between an inlet communicating with said main polymer melt and said an outlet at said orifice. In the most preferred embodiment, the passage comprises a barrel member extending between inlet and outlet ends selectively attached at said inlet to said main polymer melt. The orifice comprises an insert mounted internal the outlet end of said barrel. A heater means may be provided for maintaining substantially constant the temperature of the passageway. In the situation where the orifice is located at a location remote from the extruder, preferably it is located within about 5 inches of the extruder, and the pressure measurement means and the temperature measurement means are adjacent or at least in very close proximity to the orifice to measure the pressure drop across the orifice and the melt temperature at that location.

[0010] According to other preferred aspects of the present invention, the means for continuously collecting the diverted melt stream and means for weighing are in the form of a continuous collecting means. Such collecting means preferably includes means for relative movement between the melt stream and said collecting stream wherein said stream is substantially uniformly deposited on said collecting means. The preferred means for relative movement comprises a turntable. Relative movement between the melt stream is desirable to prevent the build up of drool. A drool build-up may

form a candle or tower which has a tendency to fall. Such independent movement of the drool can alter the accuracy of measurements. It is desirable to prevent the formation of candles or prevent their build-up. The turntable permits the elimination of the small diameter candle that is formed by the diverted melt stream discharged by the capillary orifice. In the absence of a turntable, these candles increase in height above the scale and need to be removed before they reach the orifice; this requires frequent attention by the operator. The turntable above the scale forms a thick wall cylinder or a cylinder with much larger diameter than the drool candles, and allows a continuous weight measurement for much longer time without software or operator interruption.

[0011] An alternate preferred technique for weight measurement includes sundering means intermediate said capillary orifice and said scale means for reducing the at least partially solidified material into smaller units. This technique is hereinafter explained in detail. The turntable approach permits a more continuous measurement of the diverted melt stream with the disadvantages of separate processing a dried melt stream. In the most preferred embodiment, the present invention relates to a system for providing process control information, such as viscosity, concerning a polymer melt comprises a barrel member extending between inlet and outlet ends which is selectively attached to a conduit containing a main stream of the polymer melt. The barrel member is adapted to receive at its inlet end a diverted melt stream from the conduit and is provided with temperature and pressure sensors for measuring the temperature and pressure, respectively, of the diverted melt stream. A capillary orifice is provided at the outlet end of the barrel member for receiving, then discharging, the diverted melt stream. As discharged, the melt stream may be at least partially solidified. A scale receives and weighs the diverted melt stream discharged by the capillary orifice and includes a weight sensor for measuring the weight of the solidified diverted melt stream. A computer is responsive to signals received from the temperature, pressure and weight sensors for determining the process characteristics of the main stream of the polymer melt. A heater jacket preferably surrounds the barrel member for maintaining its temperature substantially constant. The capillary orifice has an L/D which is greater than about 3:1. The diverted melt stream transforms into at least partially solidified material after it is discharged from the capillary orifice and may be dropped onto a receptacle surface which is continuously weighed. By rotating the surface, and letting the stream drop away from its center of rotation, more mass may be uniformly and evenly deposited, and a longer interval may be allowed before removal of plastic from the receptacle. A suitable sundering mechanism may be provided intermediate the capillary orifice and the receptacle surface for disintegrating the plastic into smaller units.

[0012] The invention is directed to an on-line rheom-

eter device capable of measuring melt viscosities of glass and/or mineral filled and unfilled thermoplastic resins. Preliminary results of several different glass filled flame retardant and non flame retardant grades from a manufacturing pilot line have indicated that differences between the on-line and quality assurance laboratory measurements are within the standard deviation of the laboratory measurement itself.

[0013] In order to improve critical to quality variables such as viscosity, flow consistency, and laboratory response time, prior to the present invention, it was realized that an in-/on-line rheometer would be highly desirable. When addressing the problem which led to the invention, the expectations were: (a) the improved rheometer has to produce transformable data "apples to apples", from in/on-line to the quality assurance laboratory; and (b) the device has to be robust, user friendly, and simple for quick mounting, and easy maintenance.

[0014] Previously, commercially available in/on line rheometers could not meet the expectations recited in (a) and (b) above. The difficulties lay with the inability of the components in known rheometers, such as gear pumps, stress transducers, sensors and other moving parts to withstand the wear caused by abrasive fillers such as glass fibers and minerals. The goal, then, realized by the invention, was to provide a device capable of measuring the melt viscosity of unfilled, and glass and or mineral filled resins in real time that would provide "apples to apples" comparison with quality assurance laboratory data. The resulting device is robust, easy to maintain, user friendly, and can be coupled and decoupled quickly from the die head. The melt flow through the rheometer is naturally self-cleaning and hence it does not require physical clean up between grades of polymer melt material. It is also desirable to reduce wear.

[0015] The on-line rheometer device of the invention comprises a modified die head, a capillary orifice, pressure and temperature sensors located upstream of the orifice, an option of a mini-pelletizer or grinder, a stationary or rotating receptacle, and a weight recorder. The heart of the rheometer is the capillary orifice with $L/D > \sim 3:1$ where L and D are length and transverse dimension, perhaps diameter, respectively.

[0016] The conduit containing a main stream of the polymer melt, or possibly the die head may be modified by drilling a small hole, perhaps 0.5 inch in diameter, into the conduit to tap into the main stream thereby forming a side stream, then adding a barrel extension to the side stream with a capillary orifice threaded in or mounted at its exit. The rheometer barrel that is extended out of the die head is wrapped with a heater jacket to prevent heat loss or gain. A very small fraction of the polymer melt is diverted to the rheometer barrel and the capillary. The air-cooled plastic is then dropped to a stationary or rotating receptacle on a scale. The response of the rheometer is minutes after making setpoint adjustment. To lengthen the interval required to empty the receptacle,

the receptacle may be rotated, or a grinder/pelletizer may be used, or both.

[0017] Pressure and temperature transducers and a weight recorder associated with the scale send respective output signals (pressure, P, temperature, T, and flow rate, Q respectively) to an in/out board of a computer. The computer carries out pre-programmed tasks to convert the signals to viscosities. These tasks include execution of certain mathematical functions or algorithms derived from fundamentals of fluid mechanics and rheology.

[0018] The rheometer just described, unlike commercially available options, does not require that the pressure and temperature in the die head and in the capillary be controlled. The algorithm to calculate real time viscosity, from P, T, and Q, is unique and the constants used in the algorithm are characteristics of the product and thus referred to as signatures. The rheometer's capillary orifice enables "apples to apples" comparison with quality assurance data since the melt viscosity rheometers used in the quality assurance laboratory are based on capillary geometry (for example, a melt flow indexer described in ASTM D1238). The elimination of the gear pump also greatly increases the flexibility and durability of the rheometer of the invention.

[0019] The present invention has several features and provides a number of advantages, some of which are summarized as follows: it enables truly on-line measurements for attaining quicker response and more accurate control of manufacturing processes involving polymer melts; mounts easily to a large variety of polymer processors such as single and twin screw extruders as well as any other continuous mixers and kneaders; permits the conduct of on-line measurements with a minimal intrusion and no contamination of the main process stream being monitored; permits increased versatility in the nature and extent of the information derived from on-line measurements of polymer melts, as well as increased accuracy in the information itself; enables ease of installation and use in connection with current manufacturing equipment and techniques; allows ready adaptation for use in connection with a wide variety of materials and operating conditions; provides a convenient station for additional sensing and observation devices available for monitoring the quality of the polymer melt and integration with manufacturing processes via feedback loop controller; facilitates cleaning and general maintenance, as well as replacement of component parts either for repair or adaptation to specific materials and operating conditions; and provides a simple and rugged construction without moving parts for economical manufacture and reliable long term service. This data may be used as an input for the determination of the viscosity on a continuous basis. An advantage of this technique is a reduction in weight variability which might occur when using the stationary receptacle.

[0020] Other and further features, advantages, and benefits of the invention will become apparent in the fol-

lowing description taken in conjunction with the following drawings, where like numerals refer to like parts throughout the disclosure, and in which:-

Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram, certain parts being cut away and shown in section, illustrating a system, embodying the present invention, for providing process control information concerning a polymer melt;

Fig. 2 is a diagrammatic illustration of a die head usable with the system illustrated in Fig. 1; and

Fig. 3 is a detail view of some parts illustrated in Fig. 1 but illustrating another embodiment thereof.

[0021] Turn now to the drawings and, initially, to Fig. 1 which diagrammatically illustrates part of a plastics extrusion machine 20 including a conduit 22 containing a main stream 24 of polymer melt terminating at a die head 26 (Fig. 2) of a polymer extruder which produces a plurality of polymer strands 28. The plastics extrusion machine 20 includes a system 30 for providing process control information concerning the polymer melt.

[0022] In turn, the system 30 includes an on-line rheometer device 32 which, in one instance, may be operably attached to the conduit 22 (Fig. 1) or, in another instance, may be operably attached to the die head 26 itself (Fig. 2). In either instance, a barrel member 34 extends between an inlet end 36 and an outlet end 38. The barrel member is selectively attached to the conduit 22 (or to the die head 26) by means of a suitable fitting 40 such as one, for example, which has a central peripheral flange 42 separating an outer threaded nipple 44 from an inner threaded nipple 46. The fitting 40 has a longitudinally extending bore 48 therethrough which is coaxial and transversely coextensive with a longitudinal bore 50 extending the length of the barrel member 34 when the nipple 44 is threadingly engaged with the inlet end of the barrel member.

[0023] A tapped hole 50 is suitably formed in the side-wall of the conduit 22 (or in the die head 26) for the threaded reception by the nipple 46. In this manner, the barrel member 34 is adapted to receive at its inlet end 36 a diverted melt stream 52 from the conduit 24. A capillary orifice or nozzle 54 is suitably fitted or mounted onto the outlet end 38 of the barrel member for receiving, then discharging, the diverted melt stream 52. A scale mechanism 56 includes a hopper 58 for receiving the diverted melt stream 52 discharged by the capillary orifice 54 and also includes a suitable weight sensor depicted at 60 for measuring the weight of a terminal collection 62 of the diverted melt stream 52. The terminal collection 62 of the diverted melt stream 52 is at least of partially solidified material and may be substantially fully solidified. The sensor 60 produces a resultant weight signal proportional to the weight of the terminal collection 62 of the diverted melt stream 52 and that weight signal is advanced to a computer 64 via a lead 66 and an in/out device 68. Similarly, a temperature sensor 70

for measuring the temperature of the diverted melt stream 52 is mounted on the barrel member 34 and produces a resultant temperature signal advanced to the computer 64 via a lead 72 and the in/out device 68. Again, a pressure sensor 74 for measuring the pressure of the diverted melt stream 52 is also mounted on the barrel member 34 and produces a resultant pressure signal advanced to the computer 64 via a lead 76 and the in/out device 68. The computer 64 is responsive to the temperature, pressure and weight signals for determining process characteristics of the main stream of the polymer melt.

[0024] The terminal collection 62 of the melt stream 52 may be carried out by continuously depositing the melt stream 52 on a surface which may be continuously weighed. By rotating the surface, the stream may be uniformly and evenly deposited on the surface. With this technique, continuous data or a record of the deposited weight of the stream is sensed. This data may be used as an input for the determination of the viscosity on a continuous basis. An advantage of this technique is a reduction in weight variability which might occur when using the previously referred to pelletization technique.

[0025] For purposes of the invention, a preferred process characteristic to be determined is the melt viscosity of the main stream 24 of the polymer melt. This may be represented by the following relationship:

$$\eta_{OL} = B^* \cdot p^4 / 8L \cdot Q$$

where

η_{OL} = on-line melt viscosity
 B = a constant, 3.14159
 p/L = pressure drop across capillary orifice 54
 R = orifice radius
 Q = flow rate (volume/time).

[0026] Another representative formula for calculating the relationship between the various variables is as follows:

$$\eta_{OL} = \pi p R^4 / 8LW$$

η_{OL} = on-line melt viscosity
 π = a constant, 3.14159
 p = pressure drop across capillary orifice 54
 R = orifice radius
 L = the length of the orifice
 p = polymer melt density
 W = polymer mass flow rate

[0027] It is desirable for the barrel member 34 to be provided with a suitable heater jacket 78 for maintaining substantially constant the temperature of the barrel member. In this regard, a second temperature sensor

80 for measuring the temperature of the barrel member 34 is also mounted on the barrel member and produces a resultant second temperature signal advanced to the computer 64 via a lead 82 and the in/out device 68. The computer 64 is responsive to the temperature measurement provided by the sensor 80 for controlling energization of the heater jacket 78 to properly maintain the temperature of the barrel member and thereby minimize the temperature gradient of the diverted melt stream 52.

[0028] The capillary orifice 54 has a discharge channel 84 defined by a length L and a transverse dimension D which would be the diameter for a circular cross section. Preferably, for purposes of the invention, the ratio of L to D is greater than about 3:1, while the smallest ratio used in the laboratory rheometer is about 3, a larger ratio is preferred to minimize entrance and exit effects.

[0029] During operation of the system 30, the diverted melt stream 52 transforms into at least partially solidified material after it is discharged from the capillary orifice 54. It is desirable, in this instance, viewing Fig. 3, to provide a sundering mechanism 86 intermediate the capillary orifice 54 and the scale mechanism 56 and hopper 58 for reducing the at least partially solidified material into smaller units of the material. The sundering mechanism 86 may be in the nature of a grinder for grinding the at least partially solidified material into granular material depicted in Fig. 1 as the terminal collection 62 of the diverted melt stream 52. A grinder suitable for purposes of the invention may be a 4x4 Economy Grinder manufactured by Battenfeld Gloucester, Division of Gloenco-Newport, of Newport, New Hampshire.

[0030] Alternatively, for the instance in which the diverted melt stream transforms into solidified continuous strand material after it is discharged from said capillary orifice, the sundering mechanism 86 may be in the nature of a mini-pelletizer for chopping the solidified continuous strand material 28 into pellets 88 as depicted in Fig. 3. A mini-pelletizer suitable for purposes of the invention may be a laboratory pelletizer Model 750-1 manufactured by Accrapak Systems Limited of Warrington, Cheshire, England.

Claims

1. A system for providing process control information concerning a polymer melt comprising:

means containing a polymer melt under pressure;

means for diverting a stream of said polymer melt directly from said containing means to and through an orifice of predetermined cross sectional area wherein the flow of said diverted portion to and through said orifice is unobstructed and directly dependent on the pressure of said main polymer melt, said cross sectional area being sized to permit the flow of said diverted

melt polymer therethrough without additional independent means acting on said diverted melt polymer for increasing flow through said orifice;

temperature sensing means for measuring the temperature of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant temperature signal;

pressure sensing means for measuring the pressure of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant pressure signal, said pressure signal being directly dependent on the pressure of polymer in said main polymer melt and the predetermined size of said orifice;

means weighing at least a portion of said diverted melt stream discharged through said orifice, said weighing means including weight sensing means for measuring the weight of diverted melt stream and producing a resultant weight signal; and

computer means responsive to the temperature, pressure and weight signals for determining process characteristics of the main polymer melt.

2. A system as set forth in claim 1 wherein said orifice is sized to provide for substantially continuous flow of polymer melt therethrough.
3. A system as set forth in claim 1 wherein said orifice is sized to correspond to an opening having a diameter of about 0.05 to about 0.15 inch.
4. A system as set forth in claim 2 wherein said means containing a polymer melt comprises an extruder.
5. A system as set forth in claim 2 wherein a passage extends between an inlet communicating with said main polymer melt and an outlet at said orifice.
6. A system as set forth in claim 1 including means for continuously collecting said melt stream and said means for weighing being operatively associated with said continuous collecting means.
7. A system as set forth in claim 6 wherein said continuous collecting means includes a turntable for providing relative movement between said melt stream and said collecting stream wherein said stream is substantially uniformly deposited on said turntable.
8. A system as set forth in claim 6 wherein said continuous collecting means transforms the melt stream into solidified continuous filament material after it is discharged from said orifice.
9. A system as set forth in claim 8 wherein the diverted melt stream transforms into at least partially solidi-

fied material after it is discharged from said orifice;
and including

sundering means intermediate said orifice
and said weighing means for reducing the at least
partially solidified material into smaller units thereof. 5

10. In combination with a plastics extrusion machine including a conduit a barrel member extending between inlet and outlet ends selectively attached to said conduit containing the main stream of the polymer melt, said barrel member being adapted to receive at said inlet end a diverted melt stream from said conduit; 10

temperature sensing means for measuring the temperature of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant temperature signal; 15

pressure sensing means for measuring the pressure of the diverted melt stream and producing a resultant pressure signal; 20

a capillary orifice at said outlet end of said barrel member for receiving, then discharging, the diverted melt stream;

scale means for receiving and weighing the diverted melt stream discharged by said capillary orifice, said scale means including weight sensing means for measuring the weight of the solidified diverted melt stream and producing a resultant weight signal; and 25

computer means responsive to the temperature, pressure and weight signals for determining process characteristics- of the main stream of the polymer melt. 30

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